

Elections in Melanesia are important national events with significant development and security implications. While external observers have sometimes invested unrealistic expectations in their capacity to drive significant improvements in governance, elections nevertheless represent important inflection points. Well-managed elections can add to political stability and support development. Poorly managed elections can become sources of conflict in their own right.

Delivering elections in Melanesia can be hard, where the small size of electoral institutions, significant resource constraints and complex political environments complicate preparations. While electoral authorities have significant experience, donor support has been important in helping them overcome resource and capacity constraints to deliver elections which have generally not ranked highly in terms of global integrity standards but have facilitated peaceful transfers of power. Such support will be more important in the future, when increasingly high-stakes money politics (Haley and Zubrinich 2015a) will make it harder for electoral authorities to hold the line.

While donor support has been important in fortifying the capacity of electoral authorities, donors — of which Australia is a major partner — have struggled to provide it in effective ways. An evaluation of Australian electoral support to PNG from 2000 to 2012 (Henderson and Boneo 2013), found it important for the timely delivery of elections, but too reactive and very expensive, with little to show in terms of more effective electoral institutions, such that the outcomes from providing support were ‘not commensurate with the effort invested’ (ibid.:28). The successful Solomon Islands election in 2014 was aided by the introduction of a biometric voter roll (COG 2014), but was extremely expensive (Haley and Zubrinich 2015b) and will be difficult to sustain.

Given the need for ongoing donor support, this In Brief reviews lessons learned in the provision of electoral assistance in Melanesia. It takes into account the recent Solomon Islands and Bougainville elections, the upcoming Vanuatu (2016) and PNG (2017) elections, and that the nature of donor

support itself is transitioning, with the number of development partners increasing and donors seeking to provide support in more effective ways. What then, are some of the key lessons learned from recent efforts to support elections in Melanesia?

Long-term and Partnership-based Approach: Best practice electoral support is delivered with regard to the electoral cycle. Preparations for the next election begin as soon as the last is completed, with support ideally changing over the electoral cycle, surging as the election approaches. If early preparations are right, the surge should be less chaotic. Because elections are complex events, making it difficult to ramp up support at the last minute, having strong partnerships in place between (and amongst) donors and electoral authorities is important to identify priority support areas and manage risks. But strong partnerships must be cultivated including through long-term and sustained donor investments. Australia benefits from the strong relations between the Australian Electoral Commission and counterpart organisations in the region, but these need to be complemented by substantive program support. One reason for the strong election in Solomon Islands in 2014 were the well-established partnerships cultivated under the Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which provided a good basis for provision of post-RAMSI support, led by the United Nations Development Programme.

Responsive to Context: Good development support responds to context. In Melanesia, this means providing timely technical support to bridge resourcing gaps. However, it also means responding to challenging political environments through complementary diplomatic engagement calibrated to political cycles. The hardest challenge facing donors can be obtaining political license to provide timely support for elections; delayed political support can mean donors are only asked to scale up assistance at the last minute. It also means thinking about how donor support can be provided in ways to help fortify electoral institutions operating in hotly contested electoral environments where officials may be vulnerable to political pressure. In PNG, the increasingly moneyed and decentralised nature of electoral politics risks wrong-footing donor

approaches which have largely been focused on supporting Port Moresby-based electoral institutions.

Expectation Management: External observers often invest unrealistic expectations in the capacity of elections to drive longed-for improvements in accountability and governance in Melanesia. This can see support skewed towards non-core activities at the expense of core election delivery priorities. Henderson and Boneo's (2013) evaluation found Australia's assistance for PNG, while important, had been spread too thin, and focused on desirable issues (e.g. gender and HIV/AIDS) at the expense of strengthening core election operations systems. It recommended that 'any future Australian electoral assistance to PNGEC should focus mainly on strengthening electoral delivery capacity' (ibid.:vi). Recognising elections in one sense as complex project management challenges, and getting the administrative basics right, should be the starting point. In Solomon Islands, the provision of electoral support as part of a wider security and state-building mission under RAMSI arguably ensured a focus on institution strengthening, improving prospects for orderly election delivery.

Engage with the Electoral System: When supporting elections, donors naturally focus on building the capacity of electoral commissions. They also need to recognise elections occur in a broader institutional context and engage with the electoral system. This means working with a range of stakeholders important to elections including government (finance ministries for timely resourcing, police for security and logistical support and provincial governments), candidates and political parties, civil society, media and other donors. Strong stakeholder coordination mechanisms can make election delivery easier, but can be hard to establish. In Solomon Islands, strong cooperation between security agencies, election officials and donors contributed to smooth election delivery in 2014 (COG 19/11/2014). In PNG, inter-institutional coordination has in the past proven difficult, but coordination mechanisms established for the Pacific Island Forum and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting may provide a good basis for better electoral coordination in 2017.

Sustainability: Melanesian electoral institutions are small and face significant human capacity and resource constraints. For example, the Solomon Islands

Electoral Commission has fewer than 10 permanent staff members in non-election years. When supporting such institutions donors need to be realistic about sustainability, acknowledging that many are unlikely to become self-sufficient for many electoral cycles. The challenge for donors is to provide long-term assistance in the most effective way, providing space for local electoral bodies to build capacity while reducing risks of election instability. A key challenge is to mitigate the moral hazards of significant donor support and the risk of reduced political interest in timely election preparation. This requires a blended donor approach, including resource supplementation, capacity building and, in some areas, capacity supplementation, complemented by long-term political dialogue. What can seem like excessive levels of donor support (relative to local resourcing) must be put in context where electoral agencies are small and the costs of electoral instability arising from badly run elections, such as in post-conflict Solomon Islands, are potentially very high.

When the long-term necessity of donor support for elections in Melanesia is acknowledged directly, the key question becomes how donors can provide support in the most effective ways, improving prospects for orderly election preparation while mitigating the costs of large-scale electoral support. This means establishing robust partnership arrangements, to form the basis from which to provide calibrated support over the course of national electoral cycles.

Author Notes

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